BEHIND THE PICTURES

PART THREE: The Documentation Process at the Various Trials Held at Nuremberg – Efforts, Challenges, and Legacy

The gathering of documentation for the various trials held at Nuremberg was highly unusual due to the chaotic nature of post-war Europe and the sheer scale of evidence involved. Evidence came from two primary sources: wartime Nazi official documentation and post-war generated records. The first group consisted of Nazi records discovered by Allied forces in various locations, often in disrepair. To salvage and organize these materials, the Allied powers established documentation centres across Germany. These records included administrative documents, orders, reports, and correspondence detailing the policies and actions of the Nazi regime. Some pre-war planning documents related to expansionist policies and the persecution of minorities were also found.

The second group of evidence was produced after the war through interrogations, affidavits, testimonies, and analyses. While the meticulous record-keeping of the Nazi regime was initially beneficial for the prosecution, many original documents were destroyed towards the war's end. Nevertheless, the surviving records formed the backbone of the prosecution's case, illustrating the deliberate, bureaucratic nature of Nazi atrocities. Despite the challenges of incompleteness, the evidence was abundant, showcasing the Nazis' own culpability through their detailed records.

The Documentation Room: The Engine Behind the Trials

A critical space in the Nuremberg Trials was the "Documentation Room," second in importance only to the courtroom itself. This room symbolised the immense administrative and analytical effort required to manage the unprecedented volume of evidence: over 100 tons of records. Documents were systematically arranged, categorised, and processed by teams of translators, analysts, and lawyers.

Under the leadership of Major William H. Coogan during the IMTN, and Fred Niebergall in the NMT, the process involved translating tens of thousands of pages into usable trial evidence. Documents were classified by subject or origin, converted into photostat copies, and summarised into "Staff Evidence Analyses," which were then indexed into document books for prosecution strategy. This meticulous attention to detail ensured that the cases against the defendants were built on solid, irrefutable evidence.

View of the mimeograph room in the Palace of Justice at Nuremberg
STADTARCHIV NÜRNBERG

> "Despite the challenges of incompleteness, the evidence was abundant..."

This room and its operations represented the culmination of an extraordinary effort to authenticate and present evidence effectively. This work continues to influence archival practices and has contributed to the preservation of these invaluable historical records across global institutions.

While men like Coogan and Niebergall were prominently credited for overseeing the process, the

crucial contributions of female translators, typists, clerks, and archivists were often overlooked in official records. These women played a vital role in managing the massive influx of documents, translating evidence, and ensuring the meticulous organisation of trial materials. Despite their significant involvement, historical narratives have largely marginalised their contributions, underscoring the need for further research and recognition of their indispensable work in the pursuit of justice at Nuremberg.

Translation: Bridging Language Barriers

A major challenge of the Nuremberg Trials was the linguistic diversity of participants. With trials conducted in four languages (English, French, German, and Russian), accurate translation was vital to ensure that all parties could understand and respond to evidence. The language division translated nearly 134,000 pages of documents, a task that required exceptional precision and efficiency

This translation process involved simultaneous translation in the courtroom for real-time communication and document translation to ensure written evidence was available in all four languages. Consistency in terminology was crucial to standardize legal and technical terms and avoid misunderstandings. The success of the translation team was critical in maintaining the fairness and credibility of the trials, as any errors could have compromised the proceedings.

Documentary Evidence: The Trials' Backbone

Unlike traditional trials, the Nuremberg Trials relied heavily on documentary evidence, which constituted three-quarters of the material presented. The remaining one-quarter of the evidence comprised primarily of witness testimonies, affidavits, and visual evidence. This reliance was both a strength and a challenge.The written records provided an irrefutable account of Nazi policies and operations, directly implicating the accused. However, the sheer volume of documents sometimes led to repetitive presentations.

Moreover, the selection of evidence was inherently skewed toward the prosecution, which had control over the vast archives of captured Nazi records. This provided them with an overwhelming abundance of materials to build their cases. In contrast, the defense faced significant challenges in presenting counter-evidence due to limited access to the same document repositories and difficulties in locating witnesses. This structural imbalance in the availability and presentation of evidence was a notable aspect of the trials.

The Harvard Law School Collection: Preserving the Legacy

The Harvard Law School (HLS) Collection is a comprehensive archive on the Nuremberg Trials, preserving trial transcripts, indictments, judgments, sentencing records, prosecution and defence exhibits, affidavits, and captured Nazi documents, which constitute 60% of the collection. Out of over one million pages, 750,000 have been digitised and are accessible through the Nuremberg Trials Project Website. The project offers trial summaries, chronologies, participant lists, explanatory charts, and advanced search tools, making it a vital resource for research on the trials and the evidence used in them.

Inside the American Document Room at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials.
CHARLES ALEXANDER U.S. CHIEF OF COUNSEL FOR THE PROSECUTION OF AXIS CRIMINALITY; HARRY S. TRUMAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM.

Reflecting on the Ongoing Legacy and Impact of the Various Trials Held at Nuremberg.

The IMTN primarily targeted top Nazi leaders and organisations central to the regime's operation, while the NMTs broadened the scope to address wider complicity by prosecuting industrialists, doctors, and mid-level officials. The IMTN established foundational legal principles, such as the rejection of the superior orders defence and the concept of crimes against humanity, and the NMTs reinforced and expanded these principles, applying them to a wider range of defendants and settings. While the IMTN was a single trial with a multinational panel of judges, the NMTs consisted of separate trials with American judges presiding.

The documentation process of the Nuremberg Trials was as extraordinary as the trials themselves. From salvaging Nazi records to organizing tens of thousands of pages into usable evidence, the effort demonstrated meticulous planning and unwavering dedication. The meticulous work in the Documentation Room ensured that justice was supported by indisputable evidence.

KRISTEN PETERS

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